

REMINISCENCES

# Razia Khan: A pupil's tribute

SALAHUDDIN AKBAR

Years ago at a Nilkhet bookstall I spotted a book *Argus Under Anesthesia*, a collection of poems. It was first printed in June 1976, exactly the time I got admitted into the English Department of Dhaka University. Until I saw the book I never knew about it and I got enthused in reading it because the poems like *St Joan In Prison*, *My Journey*, *The Map* were written by her at Azimpur Estate in 1961-62. Forty years later I was also residing in the same place and reading those poems written there! Definitely it added to my nostalgia about those golden and dreamy days of the 1960s and 1970s. I was already writing about her, one of my most favourite teachers during my university days, and I planned to surprise her with its publication in our alumni magazine. My writing about her was finished halfway. On 29 Dec 2011 morning as usual I was sipping my steaming tea and glancing through the newspapers. I stopped at the sight of an obituary Razia Khan passes away. My writing came to a halt. Perhaps it will remain like the unfinished poem *Kublai Khan* which she taught us while taking class on Coleridge!

My writing about her now takes a different direction.

I was already quite familiar with her writings. I liked it. I liked her beauty, her grace, her elegance, her style. My notions of liking were formed from my readings about her in our newspapers and magazines. But I really got the chance to see her only after becoming her student! And my liking for her increased and never ceased. I remember the impact she had on me. Her visage beams through, obscuring all the others. A warm glow inside accompanies her memory. What was it about her that has kept a hold on my memory in such a positive way all these years? What was

so great about her? What did I gain from her classes during my most dreamy years? What did I take with me that has lasted all along? There must be something about my favourite professor that made her distinct from the others. She displayed a personal interest in her students, caring and engaging in dynamics, in genuine love of her role as a teacher, and continually offered encouragement and praise.

In our first year honours she was assigned to take classes with us on the Romantic Period. She was given Lord Byron and Coleridge, who were less familiar to us compared to Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. And how passionately she explained Byron's masterpiece, *Don Juan*, which Byron himself called an epic satire, and another two of the most remarkable and enduring poems in English, which are Coleridge's famous ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kublai Khan* that contains the very essence of Romanticism. The impact of her teaching was so obvious that years later whenever I heard the Grammy winning song *Africa* ( ...I stopped an old man along the way, hoping to find some long forgotten words of ancient melodies) I still instantly visualise the supernatural atmosphere of *Ancient Mariner* *It is an ancient Mariner, And he stoppeth one of three. By thy long grey beard and glittering eye, Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?*

She was our adorable encyclopedia a multitaled personality fully familiar with various genres of versatile interest areas. For example in music from Thumri, Nidhu babur Toppa to Beethoven, Mozart, Handel, Strauss, Hayden, Schumann..... Talking about the opium effect on Coleridge to produce his *Kublai Khan*, she showed she had no less acquaintance with the spirit world either!



She did not write much, but her literary works are enough to give her a distinct place in our literature. I recall her interview in the mid 1970s during a literary festival at Bangla Academy. Nimai Bhattacharjyo was among other literary figures from Kolkata attending that occasion. His popularity was on the rise at that time. But he was fast producing novels one after another that marred the quality of his writing. And to my delight she gave her forthright view: 'He writes well. But he is suffering from excess of writing not a good sign for a promising writer.'

Razia Khan's major novels include *Chitrokabhya*, *Bot Tolar Upanyash* which won her Bangla Academy Award, *Anukaipa*, *Padobik* and *Draupadi*. *Cruel April* is another of her collection of poems besides *Argus Under Anaesthesia*. Her novel *E Mahajibon*,

published in the Eid issue of weekly Bichitra in the 1970s seemed to me rather autobiographical in nature.

But she had regrets all along that even till her later days her publishers had not behaved well, cheating her right and left. She needed an honest and judicious publisher. I vividly recall her looking for a publisher for her books in the late 1970s when several times she told our classmate Mamun, who had a library at Bangla Bazar, to find her a publisher. And during all those years she didn't find an honest publisher. Ironically, we see so many publishers lining up to publish a book free of cost if they find the writer is in a position from where they can derive more benefits.

The grouping in our literary circle is no less than the posture of our publishers here. I was among the audience eagerly waiting to hear a recitation of self-composed poems early on 21 February in 1977 or 1978 at Bangla Academy. The presenter announced 'Now poet Razia Khan Amin will recite from her poems'. She was sitting on the dais with other poets. Before reciting she said she was greatly moved by her being called a poet. She recited perfectly. But later I felt other poets seemed to a bit lukewarm about her presence whereas they appear so much enthusiastic about some other female writers and poets.

One fine morning I was walking along the corridor of Razia madam's locked chamber. Our another teacher Suraiya Khanam shared the same room with her. Suddenly a pretty girl came forward and asked me, "Mrs Razia Khan Amin er room konta?" I showed her the room. But to my surprise, I found her unlocking the room. I rushed and asked her: "C'mon! What are you doing?" She was a little coy about her answer: "She is my mother." Then I came to know she was studying for her O Levels and she had a brother too. That pretty girl grew up

to a woman of importance in the country as she rose to prominence as a fine feature writer. And now we know her as Aasha Mehreen Amin, editor of Star Weekend Magazine. I told her that story at a French national day reception a few years ago.

In one night in the late 1980s I was serving as English news producer at BTV. The news went on air. After a few minutes I got a phone call from a viewer. He was so angry at the incorrect pronunciation and delivery of the newscaster that he couldn't help dialing BTV's newsroom. I told him it was the first news reading by the newly recruited newscaster. "It should be her last also", came the reply from the caller. Thereafter mentioning his name he told me that he had been serving at BCCI Bank in Beijing and he had come to Dhaka on a visit. I told him I was a student of his wife. The angry caller turned into a delighted viewer and I heard him over phone calling "Razia..Razia..." Moments later he came back to the phone and said she had fallen asleep but he would surely tell her about me the following morning.

During her last days she still remained active with her casual writing for Daily Star Weekend Magazine. As always her pieces were captivating for readers. I was glad to read her articles with enthusiasm. Well, the number of our universities has increased to 105 from 5 since independence owing to the rising number of students. They say it is hard to find qualified teachers for the universities. I say it is hard to find an accomplished teacher like Razia Khan Amin. On her first death anniversary I pay tribute to my one of my most favorite people. Long may she glow.

(Razia Khan Amin --- academic, writer, poet, critic --- died on 28 December 2011).

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ESSAY

## The fragrance in Parveen Shakir's poetry

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

My acquaintance with Parveen Shakir's poetry began in late 1995 in Lahore, where I had gone to attend a media conference of journalists from South Asia. At the end of the conference, those of us in the Bangladesh team --- Enayetullah Khan, Badal Rahman, Shakhawat Ali Khan, Matiur Rahman, Syed Kamaluddin and I --- decided to have a tour of a market in Lahore before flying to Karachi on our way back home. At the solitary bookshop in that particular market I was happily surprised to know of Parveen Shakir the poet and immensely sad to be informed that she had died a year previously in a car crash. I asked the salesman to give me a copy each of Parveen Shakir's collections of poetry, *Khushboo* and *Khud Kalami*, that I spotted on the shelves. He was happy to oblige. As I was about to pay him, Mintu bhai (our very dear Enayetullah Khan) stepped forward and asked me if I could read Urdu. I said indeed I could. But he would not take my word for it. Asking me to read a few lines from *Khud Kalami* before the salesman, he told the salesman to confirm if I read correctly. I read, which reading was duly confirmed by the salesman. Mintu bhai was thrilled. I walked off with the books, which after all these years form part of my little library at home.

And in all the seasons that have gone by since that December day in Lahore, I have kept in touch with Parveen Shakir through reading, and then re-reading, her poetry. I have watched her recite on youtube and I have wondered why death often comes to the young and the promising at just the point where they are ready to give more of themselves to the world. Shakir, a highly educated Pakistani civil servant and a respected poet in her country, was only forty two when she died in December 1994. Hers was a tragedy that has been hard to ignore by those who have delighted in her poetry. For me, it has been the images and the influences that mark Shakir's poetry which remain an endless source of literary ecstasy. There were all the love poems she composed, together with the ghazals which have given her a prominent berth in Urdu poetry not just in Pakistan but in neighbouring India as well. And knowing as we do of the contributions made by Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ahmad Faraz to Urdu poetry in South Asia, it is not hard to fathom the niche Parveen Shakir created for herself in a world traditionally dominated by men. Observe the following:

*Wo to khushboo hai hawa mein bikhar jayega / masla phool ka hai phool kidhar jayega*  
(He is the fragrance that will give himself to the breeze / the problem is the flower's, where will the flower go?)

All good poetry is heart-wrenching poetry. And in that simple line, Shakir speaks of the torment a woman in love goes through when her lover turns his back on her and walks away. Shakir gives you a new perspective, that of a woman mourning the departure of the one she loves, which again is in sheer contrast to the poetry of rejection which we are wont to get from men. That the heart breaks in women too, with a crack that is as loud as can be, is what you experience in Parveen Shakir. And yet the poetry of heartbreak does not come raw or prosaic. There is the subtle yet pronounced imagery Shakir employs in her poetry. One keeps coming up against such presences as fragrance, air, flower --- khushboo, hawa, phool --- as also badal (clouds), baarish (rain) and titli (bird) in her verses. And the verses, of course, ranged across a wide expanse, often extending themselves into ghazals exploring the innermost recesses of feeling. Read, again:

*Chand meri tarah pighalta raha / neend mein saari raat chalta raha / jaane kis dukh se dil giriftha tha / muun pe badal ki raakh malta raha / main to paanon ke kaante chunti rahi / aur wo raasta badalta raha ...*  
(Like me the moon went on melting / all night long it



travelled in slumber / who knows in what sadness the heart was imprisoned? / it went on rubbing the ashes of the clouds on its face / I went on choosing thorns for my feet / and he went on changing his path ...)

There was a spirit of the fiercely religious in Shakir's ghazals, as these invocations to the Creator make clear:

*My heart is fiery, and to reach thee / it shall render my body a canoe and my blood a river .*

And it is then back to romance, in a defiant statement of self-assertion:

*I will live my life away from you / like an exile ...*

Parveen Shakir's poetry rests on a plenitude of similes and metaphors, as her emphasis on fragrance, clouds, birds, et al, demonstrates so clearly. There is too, in her

free verse, a free-wheeling, unapologetic use of English terms, a style which often left her verses open to criticism from the purist quarters of Urdu poetry. But for Shakir, the use of English in certain instances was motivated by two factors. In the first place, it was necessary for her to bring to her readers the contemporary trends, however unpalatable, which marked the use of Urdu as a language of the masses. In the second, through employing English words and terms in certain instances, Shakir hits home with the point she tries to make in the poetry. That said, there were in Parveen Shakir certain shades of influence --- of T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats --- that came from her reading and assessment of these two predominant poets of the twentieth century.

Modernism is what punctuates Parveen Shakir's poetry. Her diction is direct, her attitude is unembarrassed and her approach is one of the no-nonsense kind. Observe, yet once more:



*Ab kya jo tere paas aaon / kis maan pe tujh ko aazmaon / zakhm ab to saamne se khaon / dushman se na dosti barhaon / titli ki tarah jo urh chuka hai / wo lamha kahan se khoj laon ...*

(What remains for me now to come to you? / By what standard should I test you? / My wounds strike me from the front / I make no friendship with the enemy / that which has flown like the bird / from where shall I retrieve that moment?).

(Parveen Shakir --- Pakistani poet, columnist and civil servant --- was born on 24 November 1952 and died in a road accident on 26 December 1994).

SYED BADRUL AHSAN, EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR, EDITS STAR LITERATURE AND STAR BOOKS REVIEW.

MANMAY ZAFAR

I had the privilege of being taught by Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid (1924-2012) when I studied for an MA in the Department of English at Dhaka University back in 1997. By then, he had retired from full-time teaching at Dhaka but still continued to teach a class or two as a supernumerary professor. I was not taught by him during my undergraduate years and don't remember seeing him very often at the department. My first encounter with Professor Murshid was, in fact, at a conference on women's studies at the British Council which was also incidentally attended by Taslima Nasrin, the controversial Bangladeshi writer. During my student years, I was quite active in the cultural and literary circuit of Dhaka University. I directed a drama on the Liberation War and appeared in it at the TSC, presented departmental programmes at the British Council, recited poems from English, French and Bangladeshi writers in various forums, and even headed the departmental debating team to victory. In those days, the British Council was yet to decimate its excellent library for profit; and for anyone seriously studying English literature, it was a safe haven for good books, bearable company, and occasional good *addas*. The English Department at Dhaka regularly hosted many of its seminars in liaison with the British Council; and at one such seminar, Professor Murshid stood up to give his blistering analysis of an academic paper just delivered.

On first sight, I found Professor Murshid charismatic. He was a tall, slim, handsomely dressed, fair looking 70-year old professor who spoke in an inflected English accent. He chose his words carefully as if he were a gems collector looking for the perfect diamonds of immaculate shine to present to the world. The purpose of his intervention seemed to be to both teach and delight. At a time when we were a bit fatigued having survived some academic papers that were mostly sound and fury signifying nothing, Professor Murshid's critique being energetically delivered, as he paced up and down the aisle, made quite an impression on the audience. He was duly greeted with a spontaneous round of applause, and I decided to be on the lookout for a class with the professor who appeared to be a celebrity academic.

I did not have to wait long as I found out that Professor Murshid would be teaching us the French poet Charles Baudelaire and the Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden. His classes were scheduled for 8 in the morning, at an hour when some students stayed back in bed instead of attending what turned out to be a rewarding learning experience. We took his classes without having any idea of his past accomplishments. He was not only a mere professor at Dhaka, but during his long career, he researched at Nottingham and Harvard universities, served as the Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University and established its much acclaimed Institute of Bangladesh Studies. He was also Assistant Secretary General of the Commonwealth Commission in the UK, and Bangladesh's ambassador to Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. During the 1950s and '60s, for 17 long years, he edited *New Values*, a journal vociferously promoting free thinking. Most importantly, he was a *muktijoddha*, being actively involved with the Mujibnagar government of Bangladesh. But then, of course, we knew nothing of his achievements. In this regard, he was unlike some of the teachers I've met both at Dhaka and other academic institutions. Professor Murshid was in a class of his own, one who rose confidently above the petty drumbeats of self-promotion. Although he never boasted of his remarkable career, his genius did shine



through each and every time he opened his mouth and uttered a sentence that was crafted, in the signature Murshid style, meticulously, thoughtfully, wisely. Less is more, like many a great writer, was Professor Murshid's motto. Not surprisingly, to hear him was a delight, and to be taught by him, as Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury recently said, was a privilege.

In class, we found Professor Murshid to be an exceptionally gifted teacher of literature. He had a real love for writers and their world, and his passion for understanding their lives and presenting them to his students, with all its filth and glory, was a task that he took on board with much enthusiasm. Through his teaching, he seemed to tell his impressionable young students to accept life and all its diversity. I remember his detailed lecture on Charles Baudelaire where he candidly spoke about the French poet's time spent in various brothels and how that enriched Baudelaire's experience as a writer. Professor Murshid also touched very sensitively upon Auden's love affair with another writer, Christopher Isherwood. And dramatically again, he offered to us Isherwood's lamentations over Auden's death as if only to prove his point that "it is possible for a man to love another man". We were young, open to new ideas, and willing to learn, and Professor Murshid was one of the few teachers willing to teach, to share, and to enlighten, in equal measure.

On my recent return to Bangladesh, I met Professor Murshid twice, once at a programme arranged in his honour, and then at his birthday celebration at the Gulshan Club where I had the privilege to speak and to wish him Happy Birthday. However, I did discover, much to my sorrow, that the last year's stroke had left a veil over his mind, and he had problems recognising his one-time favourite student. His face did lighten up as I mentioned my research on Bangladesh at Oxford University, but that was it. It was also difficult for the once always articulate Professor Murshid to speak, and I understood that no detailed conversation from then on would be possible. I did expect that we would have a good *adda* after all these years, but I left both the meetings with a hint of *abhiman* that nearly untranslatable Bengali emotion. I experienced *abhiman* because Murshid sir, a revered father figure, could not recognise his student well. I knew it was not his fault, but I kept on asking myself why we couldn't have that *galpa shalpa* he once promised when I called him to get directions to his place in Dhaka.

I have little faith in afterlife, but I still like to think that we would meet again, probably for a hearty *adda* on Baudelaire or Bangladesh over a cup of tea. Not today, not tomorrow, but maybe in some good sixty years' time. Until then, goodbye Sir, and rest in peace.

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TRIBUTE

## And gladly did he teach!